

Strike at Dundee University over job losses poses necessity for new rank-and-file strategy

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7 March 2025

Academic staff at Dundee University in Scotland are striking in response to the university's imposition of 200-500 job cuts, trying to resolve a staggering £30 million deficit. This is up to one sixth of the around 3,000 lecturers and support staff the university employs.

The Scottish government has reportedly offered a £15 million bridging loan, but this does not alter the fundamental issues faced by staff and students.

In January, lecturer members of the University College Union (UCU) at Dundee voted by a large majority (74 percent on a 64 percent turnout) in favour of industrial action. Three weeks of strikes involving 450 UCU members commenced February 24 and are scheduled to continue until March 14.

Despite the vote and ongoing action, the UCU's primary demand is for no "compulsory" redundancies. A UCU flyer for the ballot also called on management to "find progressive and fair solutions to financial challenges."

Immediately after the result was announced, Dundee UCU branch secretary Melissa D'Ascenzio said "we are ready to play our part in helping deliver a sustainable future." This is a pledge by the UCU to discuss and then help impose whatever cuts management and the union apparatus deem necessary—provided only that job losses are pushed through as "voluntary."

Another strike ballot at Dundee, this time for Unison members, including IT, administrative, cleaning, security and facilities staff, is also being held, running until March 18. Unison and the UCU didn't co-ordinate their ballots, working to neutralise the tremendous anger among staff and students.

The Dundee UCU (DUCU) has produced a position paper on the dispute, republished in the local press by Carlo Morelli, a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and of the SWP-dominated UCU Left. Morelli is currently standing for the post of honorary

secretary of UCU Scotland as part of the UCU Left slate of candidates.

The UCU Left and the SWP have for years systematically worked to maintain the authority of the UCU among lecturers and university staff despite the betrayals and sellouts of the UCU leadership, repeatedly sabotaging opposition to the relentless assault on members' pay and conditions.

Morelli outlined how market-driven projects—such as the controversial Tay Cities Deal, an investment project of the UK and Scottish government and local organisations—have deepened a financial crisis at Dundee to the point where the university might collapse within two years.

He noted that a financial surplus from teaching income has, since the university's founding in 1967, been able to support research spending. But a recent fall in both international and UK-based student numbers attending Dundee has undermined this. 300 home student places were unfilled last September while falling international student numbers have cost up to £2 million of the expected £12 million 2023-24 deficit.

British universities all face falling international student numbers, primarily because of the vicious scapegoating of migrants by successive governments and obstructive changes to immigration policy.

Dundee is also spending money expanding its ties with China, establishing University of Dundee Enterprises Ltd as a wholly owned subsidiary operating in the country. Any losses this project may sustain still fall on the university which, as of last month, had failed to produce its annual accounts.

Morelli's critique of all this, in line with the outlook of the UCU Left as a whole, is merely that it amounts to poor management which can be resolved through transparency and managerial accountability. The UCU Left seek to pressure university authorities in Dundee, and

across the sector, to work with them, without challenging in the slightest the overtly capitalist framework that forces such precarious financial practices.

It is not opposed to redundancies in principle, as long as they can be sold as being voluntary. Morelli himself has form on this.

The *World Socialist Web Site* noted that a fight against job losses at Heriot-Watt University in 2021 was called off by the UCU with the imprimatur of the UCU Left “on the basis of a management commitment to make no compulsory redundancies. This was hailed by UCU Scotland President and Socialist Workers Party member Carlo Morelli as a ‘magnificent victory’—even as the *Socialist Worker* admitted ‘many workers at the university have come forward to take voluntary redundancy’.”

This allowed Heriot-Watt management to continue its jobs cuts programme. In August 2024, all academic staff in its School of Social Sciences were informed of a restructuring plan including a voluntary redundancy scheme.

The UCU again immediately folded, issuing a response the next day stating, “We will support any eligible members who wish to know more about the voluntary redundancy (VR) scheme... to ensure that they secure the best possible terms.”

The origins of Dundee University’s crisis, and of the entire university sector, can be traced back to the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 under Tony Blair’s New Labour government, paving the way for the reduction of government funding. Fees were subsequently tripled by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition.

In Scotland, the dual-fee structure employed by the Scottish National Party (SNP)—no fees for students based in Scotland and high charges for others—has pushed university authorities to search for alternative sources of income, however risky, and into a heavy reliance on international students, from whom every possible penny is squeezed (up to £38,000 annually). What should be a valuable educational exchange is turned into a profit-driven revenue stream.

Dundee is far from the only Scottish university engulfed in financial crisis. Last year, the University of the Highlands and Islands was reported to be “draining money into the sand” as it merged some of its widely dispersed small campuses. St Andrews University has a recruitment freeze while the University of Edinburgh and Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen have refused to rule out redundancies.

As the financial pressures mount, Dundee University and many other institutions, have shifted towards offering courses that ever more directly serve corporate needs—typically in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and business fields—at the expense of everything else.

The crisis is UK-wide with many institutions carrying out attacks on their workforces. According to the Office for Students, three quarters of universities are in deficit and one quarter are already shedding staff, adding to the 10,300 jobs lost last year.

Birmingham City University has invited its over 4,200 staff to take severance. Cardiff University has announced plans to shed 400 full-time posts and Durham University intends 200 jobs losses. Newcastle University plans to cut £35 million in costs, including £20 million from its salary bill, threatening 300 jobs; and Belfast Queens University in Northern Ireland has a voluntary severance scheme targeting 270 posts.

This week lecturers at Newcastle University held two days of strike action against the cuts, with a further 12 days planned for this month. Staff at Brunel University in London also walked out beginning 16 days of action, in March and April, to oppose plans to axe 423 jobs.

The ongoing, year on year, strike votes and action by lecturers and non-academic staff across further and higher education are a clear repudiation of a profit-driven system that prioritises short-term financial fixes and corporate interests over the educational needs of society. But these struggles cannot be taken forward under the leadership of the trade union apparatus whose primary goal is the suppression of the class struggle so as to maintain cordial relations with management.

Workers and educators are posed with the necessity to build rank-and-file worker and student committees in every college and university. These must be independent of the trade union bureaucracy in order to challenge the subordination of education to private and corporate wealth and to unify struggles in education with those of every other section of the working class to reclaim the resources looted by the big corporations and the super-rich.



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